

5-2 Odds Against The Democrats in '76

I was talking to a prominent Democrat the other day when he suddenly smiled and exclaimed: "Well, a little more than three years from now, we'll be back in the White House."

He seemed stunned when I replied that, if I were Jimmy the Greek, I'd be laying about 5-2 odds against that possibility right now.

The fact is that Watergate, the assorted problems of the Nixon administration and the stunning resignation of Vice

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President Agnew have created a kind of euphoria among Democrats which is unjustified by past events or future possibilities.

Watergate or no Watergate, the Democratic Party of 1973 is essentially the same organization that managed group political suicide in 1968 and 1972. It's as if fate had decreed a two out of three playoff series between the liberal and conservative wings of the party. The conservatives won out a victory at the 1968 convention (following the death of Robert Kennedy and the collapse of Eugene McCarthy) but the liberals came back with a vengeance in 1972 to bury and humiliate the conservatives.

Unless some very important Democrats perceive this fact, the 1976 political season is likely to become the rubber match between these two factions—and the winner would be neither wing of the Democratic Party—but the Republicans.

During the months of July and August, my friend Pat Caddell, the young pollster who so perceptively diagnosed voter reactions around the country for George McGovern during the 1972 primary season, went around the country to take the national pulse. His conclusions should not bring comfort to any Democrat—or to any politician.

First, and most important, he found that Americans do not perceive the Republican Party as the villain of Watergate. Their feelings about the scandal are highly personalized toward Richard Nixon and the men around him. But further than that, Watergate has served as a catalyst to an overwhelming number of voters who have felt for some time that all politicians are venal. (Another national poll recently showed that politicians had dropped below used-car salesmen in the esteem of their countrymen.)

The conclusion one reaches from a careful analysis of Caddell's figures is that next year, for example, all incumbents will be in trouble with the voters. If this polling information is borne out, a number of highly regarded political figures of both parties in this country will go down to defeat—simply because they are now in office, and their opponents are not.

Even more disquieting for the Democrats is this statistic: In July, 1972, some 56 per cent of the nation's voters thought the Democrats would do a better job than the Republicans of dealing with the nation's economic problems. Only 27 per cent thought the Republicans were better for the economy. A year later, and after Watergate, 54 per cent of the voters think that neither party can really deal with the American economy. The Democrats and Repub-

licans fall back to a near tie for second place. Historically, in times of economic problems, the out party has always had the advantage on this issue. For the Democrats to lose this advantage in the growing post-Watergate cynicism is to lose a powerful weapon in their quest for the presidency.

A final point in this argument is that not since 1944 (with the exception of the unusual 1964 election of Lyndon Johnson after he had succeeded John F. Kennedy) has the Democratic Party managed to get an absolute majority of the votes in a presidential election. (The Republicans have done it three times: 1952, 1956 and 1972. In the other years, neither party won 50 per cent of the vote.)

It would not be accurate to paint a picture of total gloom for the Democrats. Certainly it is not impossible for them to win the 1976 election. But at this writing it appears that it will be difficult, and the more top-ranking Democrats who come to understand this fact, the better the chances that some hard thinking will be done on how the Democrats can move to shore up their badly divided ranks.

The chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Robert Strauss, is keenly aware of these problems. Up to now he has managed amazingly to keep the two warring factions of the party from each other's throats. But he has several time bombs ticking away that may shatter the current facade of peace.

The first is the work of the special commission appointed to look at the 1972 reforms and it is unlikely it will recommend many real changes in the rules that outraged a number of traditional Democrats, as well as the top leadership of the AFL-CIO.

Strauss will have to face up to a choice between accepting the reform commission's recommendations, which will surely anger the conservatives, and having the Democratic National Committee overturn them, which will anger the liberals. It is hard to see how he can steer a middle course.

Then there is the problem of the mid-term convention which must be held next year. Strauss has so far finessed this one by calling for the convention after the mid-term elections. He did so under strong pressure from Democratic representatives and senators running for reelection who feared that a divisive convention during the election year might hurt their electoral chances. But if that convention is going to be as divisive as many of those Democratic elected officials fear, it could also have an effect which might linger into the 1976 race.

Finally, a word about candidates. The Democrats have no shortage of talent. But there is one extremely imposing presence, that of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, and it is difficult to see how the others can get moving before the Massachusetts senator makes up his mind—which probably will not be until well into 1975.

What happens on the Republican side is now totally in the hands of President Nixon. He can name the next nominee by choosing a strong national figure as his new Vice President. Or he can name a caretaker (unlikely) which would leave the field open to a host of candidates who are untouched by the Watergate scandal.

What I'm really trying to say is that contrary to the accepted belief, Watergate and the Agnew resignation are not a free ticket to the White House for the Democrats. And the sooner they wake up to that fact, the better for them.